

Introduction

1. The Yakan people and their language

Yakan belongs to the Sama-Badjaw subgroup of the Malayo-Polynesian family of Austronesian languages. Yakan is spoken by people of the same name who live on Basilan Island, some coastal areas of the Zamboanga peninsula, and some smaller islands in the southern Philippines. It is spoken as mother tongue by an estimated 100,000 people. Basilan Island is considered to be their original home. There are slight differences of pronunciation in different parts of the island, but these differences consist mainly in intonation, some regular sound changes, various degrees of contraction in words, and some vocabulary items. Yakan speakers are generally aware of the differences of speech of those “on the other side of the island” and have no difficulty in communicating with one another.

Basilan is the northernmost and largest island in the Sulu Archipelago that stretches from the southwestern tip of Mindanao to Borneo. The island is mountainous and has peaks reaching up to 1,000 meters. It is also very fertile and most of the island is covered with plantations of coconut palms, fruit trees, and rubber trees. Very little of the original forest is left today. The Yakans are farmers and grow upland rice, root crops and a variety of fruit trees.

The Yakans are famous for their beautiful weaving and their colorful traditional clothes and customs. The women weave several types of cloth which in times past were all used to make their own clothing: *sinelu'an* for trousers (worn by men and women alike), *palantup* for jackets and short skirts for the women, *pīs* for men's headdresses, *seputangan* for women's headdresses and for tie belts and *bunga sama* for trousers and jackets. Blouses and jackets are adorned with gold or silver filigree buttons. Women wear gold jewelry with colorful gemstones. Men carry swords, the handles and scabbards of which are decorated with carvings, inlaid mother of pearl, and silver wire. Today this traditional finery is still worn for festivities.

The Yakan people are Muslims and have been so since time immemorial. Their way of life has been influenced in every aspect by the teachings of the Qur'an, but it is nevertheless typically Filipino. “They are second to none in their display of the cardinal Philippine virtues of hospitality to the stranger of goodwill, love for family, pride of name and race, sense of personal dignity, and devotion to God.” (Languages of the Southern Gateway, 1979 p. 3)

Prior to about 1930 the Yakans had succeeded in keeping outside influences to a minimum, but since the 1950s more and more change has come to the island, even to the more remote areas. People have been increasingly forced to find jobs outside their traditional home areas because the available land is no longer sufficient to support the growing population. Educational opportunities have also increased and with them have come new ideas and expectations. Since the early 1970s political unrest has troubled the island of Basilan, but in spite of all the cultural and political changes, the Yakans have kept their distinctive cultural heritage and their language. New words have been borrowed from other languages, but there appears to be no danger of the Yakan language becoming extinct. The language is used extensively throughout the island as the main means of communication in the home and community.

YAKAN-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

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